Collaboratively leading the dance
Balancing directiveness in empowering young clients in secondary school counselling

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to explore perspectives of secondary school guidance counsellors in Aotearoa New Zealand in relation to their use of directiveness in a client-centred approach to their therapy relationship with adolescent clients. Six high school counsellors were interviewed, and their transcripts analysed using thematic analysis. The study found the counsellors may use different specific skills ranging on a continuum between a more non-directive client-centred approach and the use of more directive skills. The selection of specific skills at different times was dependent upon the presenting issue, related circumstances, and the needs of the young client. Issues involving risk called for more directiveness from counsellors. Participants emphasised an empowerment process between an adult counsellor and adolescent client in a school setting. In the use of directiveness, a collaborative process that enables tailoring therapy to client needs was discussed.

Keywords

school guidance counselling, directive counselling, empowerment, therapeutic relationship, tailoring therapy

Secondary school students in Aotearoa New Zealand may seek counselling at their school for a wide range of issues, including family problems, anxiety, school issues, peer friendships, and depression (Education Review Office, 2013; Hughes et al., 2019; Manthei et al., 2020). Recent research additionally finds that many students may consider the counselling space as a "refuge" from other pressures and somewhere that provides a safe space for emotional expression (Knight et al., 2018). This same research provides a glimpse of the workload that school counsellors may be dealing with. The New Zealand Association for Counsellors (NZAC) recommends a ratio of one school counsellor to 400 students (as cited in Manthei et al., 2020). However, due to funding-related issues, many schools may not have the appropriate numbers of school counsellors to align with the roll size and arising needs (Education Review Office, 2013). In fact, recently published research finds that the average ratio in New Zealand secondary schools currently is about one counsellor to 668 students (Manthei et al., 2020). As a result, guidance and counselling services in high schools are often a limited resource. Unfortunately, it has been reported that about 91% of high school guidance counsellors who responded to a survey have a waitlist that lasts up to seven days (Counselling Aotearoa News, 2019).

The current study explores counsellors' use of directive skills with young clients in school settings alongside the idea of developmentally appropriate practice in counselling. When used appropriately, directiveness may help tailor therapy to client needs and preferences (Cooper & McLeod, 2011). According to Swift et al. (2018), client preferences may include counsellors from specific cultural backgrounds, or having certain personality characteristics, among other things. It is our contention that

therapist styles and levels of directiveness could possibly be considered within these ideas. The writers also specifically acknowledge the positive relation between counselling treatment outcomes and the accommodation of client preferences, including aspects of the counselling process and the counsellors themselves (Swift et al., 2018). In fact, the American Psychological Association (APA) Presidential Task Force (2006) defines evidence-based practice as the "integration of the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of patient characteristics, culture and preferences" (p. 273).

In the interests of tailoring therapy and considering client needs, ideally the counsellor would consider and respect the developmental needs of a young client, giving them the right to make their own decisions as well as having a genuine sense of responsibility towards the safety and wellbeing of the young person (DiGiuseppe et al., 1996).

Shirk et al. (2011) explore Bordin's (1979) concept of the "working alliance" in the context of a counselling relationship with younger clients. Bordin (1979) explains that a working alliance includes the development of a bond between counsellor and client, as well as an agreement on goals and tasks of the therapeutic process. In taking up the working alliance concept, Shirk et al. (2011) clarify that the bond with adolescent clients often looks very different to that with adults and children. Although a therapeutic relationship is generalised as one which the client can rely on for emotional support, adolescents may not always choose to engage with that support (Shirk et al., 2011). Possible reasons for this may be that adolescents are increasingly seeking independence (Wright, 2014) and tend to place more importance on their friends and social life (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). As a result, they may often prefer to seek support from their friends instead of an adult. It seems important to clarify that young people do value receiving support and empathy from adults they can trust, as shown in the literature. They create and maintain those connections in different ways than adults and children.

In addition, the client's goals and expectations for their work in counselling need to be explored collaboratively by the counsellor. Norcross (2010) considers it helpful to talk with a client about, and where possible to contract, the specific methods to be utilised in the counselling process as it develops. However, children and younger adolescents may not yet have developed the cognitive abilities of reasoning and abstract thought to understand the process of therapy, the tasks taken up, and their links with the goals (Shirk et al., 2011). Among the most prominent names in the field of cognitive development is Piaget (1972), who states that children understand and think about things through concrete representations of ideas. Young people therefore are still developing hypothetical thinking skills, the use of abstract thought, and problem-solving skills, which are more likely required in a counselling process. Piaget (1972) also states that adolescents are often in the process of learning to understand different perspectives and points of view as they begin to develop these higher order thinking skills. While Piaget's stage theory was later criticised for several reasons, there is other research evidence which indicates that the part of the human brain responsible for decision making, executive function, and long-term thinking, as well as planning, is reconstructed during adolescence (Wright, 2014). As such, these skills may not be fully accessible to the young person, and as a result of these higher order thinking skills still being in development younger clients may often lack awareness and insight, and tend to consider the cause of a problem as external to themselves (DiGiuseppe et al., 1996). In turn, an adolescent's ability to suitably make independent decisions about the counselling process as well as goals and tasks to be undertaken might not be fully accessible.

Despite their desire to seek more independence (Wright, 2014), young people may face a "developmental dilemma" as it may be claimed that they do not have the personal autonomy of adulthood (Geldard et al., 2016). Nonetheless, young people may experience developmental transformations at different rates, and these may be impacted by their social settings (Oetzel & Scherer, 2003; Piaget, 1972). High school guidance counsellors, therefore, may find themselves working with

young people across a range of different developmental levels and individual interests. Being aware of and responding appropriately are important aspects of tailoring therapy to each client. The potential range of developmental difference calls for a responsive and proactive approach to the therapeutic relationship with younger clients (Geldard et al., 2016).

Literature review

The literature search showed that there is little research focusing on a counsellor's use of directiveness with young clients. In fact, Hayes (2017) states that there is very little research evidence that discusses the gap between counsellors' supportive skills and directive skills. The literature review for this research begins, therefore, with a look at the broader therapeutic relationship between counsellor and client to bring out ideas related to the use of directive skills.

When considering a therapeutic approach, it is relevant to think about what young clients may seek in a counselling relationship. Primarily, it is evident that Rogers' (1957) core conditions for therapeutic change, including genuineness, honesty, authenticity (Geldard et al., 2016; Gibson et al., 2016), and non-judgemental, unconditional acceptance of the young person (Everall & Paulson, 2002; Westergaard, 2013) are widely appreciated by young clients. These factors create a safe space for the young person to talk, which in turn helps them feel heard and understood (Everall & Paulson, 2002).

In addition, young people place importance on being able to exercise their own control and autonomy (Everall & Paulson, 2002; Gibson et al., 2016). In a similar vein, Rogers (1957) described unconditional positive regard as a therapist's non-possessive warmth or caring for clients with acceptance for them each as a unique person with their own thoughts and feelings. Young people may sometimes object to any kind of authority being exerted over them and consider it essential to be able to keep control over the focus of the counselling session as well as the choice to engage in and terminate counselling (Gibson et al., 2016).

A number of authors contend that there is an uneven power distribution in any therapeutic relationship that stems from an inherent inequality between the person seeking help and the person offering help (Bond, 2015; Knox & Cooper, 2015). Furthermore, there is also a power differential related to age between an adult counsellor and an adolescent client, particularly in a school setting. Such a power dynamic may have a negative impact on the therapeutic relationship and possibly therapy outcomes (Knox & Cooper, 2015). While it may be helpful to consider an egalitarian relationship (Everall & Paulson, 2002), research in the New Zealand context also indicates that young people may appreciate hearing about their counsellor's "adult perspective" (Gibson et al., 2016, p. 1062). Receiving guidance from an adult may also help a young person to feel more confident in their ability and manner of addressing certain issues (Martin et al., 2016). In fact, some young people find great value in guidance and seek advice from their counsellor (Geldard et al., 2016). With these factors in mind, there may be some benefit in the use of directive skills in counselling with young people.

Kahn (1999) argues that where a client might find directives helpful, this directiveness could then be considered client-centred. He has highlighted the need for counsellors to consider being directive at times since some clients may interpret a refusal to be directive as frustrating or indicating the counsellor's lack of involvement in the client's process. Further, he explains that insisting on being non-directive when the situation or client's needs may call for a more directive intervention may be seen as too rigid and be quite harmful to the therapeutic relationship and process.

Counselling approaches can be viewed on a continuum from more non-directive client-centred approaches, on the one end, to more directive approaches and skills as we approach the other. There are a range of responses utilised by the counsellor that can be considered as directive. One of the ways counsellors may be directive is by structuring or planning for sessions, as counsellors select activities or exercises from their technical knowledge and repertoire (Mearns, 2003). Counsellors may also proactively select specific counselling skills and strategies in response to the immediate needs of their client, a response which requires the counsellors to be active, spontaneous, and creative (Geldard et al., 2016). These decisions directly affect the conversation and focus of the session.

Young people may often expect counsellors to provide answers and give advice (Geldard et al., 2016). When advice is not offered, young people may consider this a limitation of counselling. Some young people find great value and support in learning about the counsellor's thoughts and questions about the presenting situation. While it may sometimes be helpful for clients, the question about the value of advice in counselling still remains a gap in the research (Lynass et al., 2012), and thus forms some of the rationale for the current research.

Historically, there seems to be a lot of emphasis placed on the guidance role of a high school counsellor in Aotearoa New Zealand (Hermansson, 1981). In the American context, Geldard and his colleagues (2016) wrote about providing appropriate, useful, and correct information to adolescent clients as a significant aspect of this role. This is particularly crucial in situations where substantial decisions need to be made, for instance, when there is a question about someone's safety. While client autonomy is one of the core ethical values for counsellors, there are some limitations (Bond, 2015). One of these limitations may be about the competence for decision making of the young person. As discussed earlier, adolescent clients may present at different maturity levels influenced by their developmental and neurodevelopmental changes. Conversely, the Gillick Principle, originating in the United Kingdom based on medical law and adopted in several other countries including New Zealand, provides some insight for counsellors to work through some of these complexities. Gillick-competent children are entitled to give or refuse consent because they are considered to have sufficient maturity and understanding as well as intelligence to make decisions with regard to their own lives (Ludbrook, 2012). However, this is still likely not an easy process to navigate through.

The second limitation relates to situations where there is risk of serious harm to the client or others (NZAC, 2016). In situations where the risk of serious harm is imminent, including situations when a client may be in emotional anguish, may have a mental illness, or the influence of drugs or alcohol may be involved, a counsellor may be limited from encouraging client autonomy (Agee, 2011). Further, when there is a risk of serious harm through suicide, even if a client of any age disagrees with the counsellor about breaking confidentiality, the counsellor is ethically obliged to speak to others to ensure the safety of the client (Agee, 2011). Contingent upon the client needs and presenting situation, tailoring therapy to questions of client competence and safety may indeed fall on the more directive end of a therapeutic continuum.

Methodology and methods

The current study contributes to the broader bodies of literature on school counselling and the therapeutic relationship with young clients. More specifically, the study sought to understand how high school counsellors in Aotearoa New Zealand might work directively with their young clients.

The specific research question asked was: "How do high school counsellors in Aotearoa New Zealand balance the use of directiveness with a client-centred focus in their therapeutic relationship with their adolescent clients?"

The research question lent itself to an exploratory study using qualitative methodology (McLeod, 2015). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse themes raised in semi-structured interviews with practising high school guidance counsellors.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval for this project was granted by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. The main considerations were related to participant confidentiality and voluntary participation. An email from the research supervisor (second author) invited prospective participants to take part in the study. Participants then actively opted into the study by emailing the researcher (first author). Additionally, the option to withdraw was available to participants.

It was also necessary to consider responses to incidental findings or distress in the participant as a result of interview discussions. In such a situation, the researcher was prepared to seek consultation and support from her supervisor in order to provide required resources to the respective participant. However, no such concerns arose in the interview process.

Participants

The recruitment process began by posting an advertisement about the study in the NZAC Auckland Branch Newsletter inviting counsellors working in secondary schools in Auckland to participate in the research. This yielded one participant. Further recruitment was sought through emails sent out to prospective participants by the second author, clarifying that there was no pressure or expectation to participate. This yielded three participants. In addition, two participants contacted the researcher after hearing about the research through word of mouth. In total, there were six participants.

Originally, inclusion criteria included at least five years of experience as a school counsellor and a full membership of a recognised professional body such as NZAC. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, recruiting participants was a challenging process due to the busy schedules of school counsellors. Four participants were recruited who met these criteria. Changing the above criteria to recruit two other school counsellors to participate in the research and share valuable ideas allowed the perspectives of beginning counsellors to be included in the research report. It is important to note that participants included a predominantly Pākehā sample, and the lack of Māori representation is a limitation of this study. This lack of representation was likely attributed to the lack of availability of counsellors for participation due to their heavy workloads and the lower numbers of Māori and Pasifika counsellors in the school counselling field.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a previously prepared interview guideline and following through on what was being shared by the participant. The interviews were audio recorded, averaging an hour in length. The interview process was designed to start with broader reflections on the participants' views and experiences of their therapeutic relationships with adolescent clients, before focusing on more specific questions related to using a directive approach in counselling.

An example of a broader question was: "What makes the therapy relationship with youth clients important to you?"

> Examples of some of the more specific questions were: "What helps you decide when to be more directive in your client-centred practice?" and "What impact do you think being directive has on the therapeutic relationship with the young person?"

Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher and sent to the respective participants for review. Few changes were requested and implemented in these transcripts. The final transcripts became the data that were then analysed using thematic analysis procedures as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006). A mind map was created based on the emerging themes, following which the research report was prepared.

Rigour

In the active role of a qualitative researcher, the researcher has conducted the study in a rigorous manner, as recommended by a number of writers (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Caelli et al., 2003; McLeod, 2015; Sandelowski, 1986). In keeping with Sandelowski's (1986) suggestions for improving credibility, fittingness, and auditability, the researcher has specified the steps followed in conducting this study. Additionally, supervision has been a great resource to strengthen my reflexive engagement with the research. Overall, as a beginning researcher, I (first author) have endeavoured to conduct a thorough, inclusive, and comprehensive (Braun & Clarke, 2006) research process.

Findings and discussion

Six participants took part in this study. Each participant selected a pseudonym for themselves in order to maintain their anonymity in the research report. The participants were Marge, Mary, Liam, Rose, Jen and Eleanor. Rose and Eleanor were early years counsellors invited to participate after the inclusion criteria were revised. As the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) procedure was carried out, patterns and themes were identified.

The following were the themes identified:

- The choice of being directive depends on the needs of the young client;
- Empowering young clients;
- Collaboration and pacing in choosing to be directive;
- Wise words for beginning counsellors.

To begin with, when asked about the different ways in which a counsellor may be directive with a young client, all participants talked about a wide range of things that could be considered as offering a direction, including the use of questions and skills to direct the conversation, selecting methods and approaches from their counselling knowledge, and making decisions in immediate response to client needs. In situations where risk of harm is evident, participants were even more directive in the use of clear statements about the need to disclose to other significant adults and next steps for keeping the young person safe. This range of directive skills sits on a continuum from less directive skills or behaviours like offering an idea to more directive skills or behaviours like being a "clear leader" as a counsellor and providing information or guidance.

The choice of being directive depends on the needs of the client

All participants explained that the choice of being directive depends upon the needs of the client. This includes the client's needs in the moment as well as considering a more long-term perspective based on the presenting circumstances. For instance, Mary talked about the value of supporting the young person in "shifting states" as a way of offering a directive. She shared an example to illustrate an experience of seeing a client only briefly to make a time for a session. However, the client became quite overwhelmed. Mary explained:

> she was okay, but she needed to be more okay, so we had a different conversation, which was about movies and about Netflix just for a few minutes so that she was feeling a bit better and she could go back.

Similarly, several participants identified that it might be valuable to consider the developmental level of the young person. Liam said:

> I think you've got to have an awareness of where the student's at. So, age can be quite an important thing…Senior boys are more up for sort of deeper work, and they're also up for a little bit more input like psychoeducational stuff, umm…maybe being a bit directive about things than [with] younger boys.

This perspective suggests that self-awareness and insight are key for an effective therapeutic process (Shirk et al., 2011), and particularly necessary when identifying relevant goals and tasks of counselling. As with ideas pointed out in the literature review from the developmental perspective, it is indeed evident that younger clients may not have the level of maturity required for insight, and to identify goals and tasks of counselling (Shirk et al., 2011). In attending to these developmental needs, Marge shared an example of choosing to be a little directive with her young client who was struggling with various important relationships in her life. Marge detailed her thought process and course of action, saying:

> So, I made a decision, out of those three relationships, the way forward would be to work on her relationship with mum…because I understood that in her wider context of her life…that mum is the secure base for her

Equally, it is quite important to be cautious about considering a young person's age in the way we work with them. Mary clarified, "I don't think that would alter the way I would work with them in the sense that I would work equally respectfully…" She finds that it always "comes back to the individual" because working in a school, counsellors may come across young people at different ages and a range of maturity levels. In addition, all participants clarified that in situations where risk may be involved they would be inclined to take a more directive stance in order to keep their clients safe and engage in ethically sound practice. All participants echoed ideas about the need to be a "clear leader" and remind their client about working within the limits of confidentiality. They also placed importance on honesty or transparency with the young person about their concern and agenda in such situations, which also sits in accord with the literature.

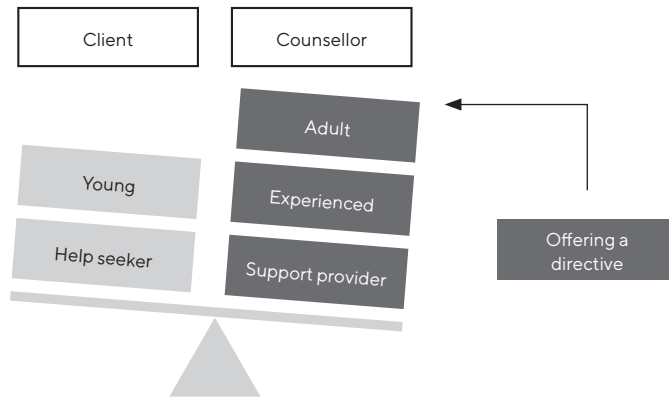## Empowering young clients

Figure 1
Power dynamics between counsellor and client

A valuable finding of this study was that five participants discussed power dynamics between the counsellor and client, as it occurs in a school setting. This has been demonstrated in a figure prepared by the researcher during the analysis process (Fig. 1). The difference in age and experience places some power with the counsellor (Knox & Cooper, 2014). Additionally, there is an inherent power differential that arises from the nature of the counselling relationship between a help-seeking client and a professional counsellor (Bond, 2015). All participants reaffirmed ideas in the literature about the benefits of identifying any power differential between counsellor and young client and addressing it. Differently put, all participants shared the perspective of working to empower their young clients.

At this juncture, it is relevant to draw on ideas from the "developmental relationships framework" for working across intervention settings (Li & Julian, 2012), wherein creating a balance of power is a central aspect. The writers draw on the work of Vygotsky (1978) to explain that this balancing of power relations can be gradually achieved by the adult providing scaffolding for the young person as they work from the young person's "zone of proximal development" (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) defines ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Counsellors may find this a useful model to draw on when working to share power with their clients.

Further, Mary discussed her "shared power philosophy," while Jen shared her belief that the "power differential needs to be flat." Several participants also described different ways in which they might do so. For instance, Mary believed that asking students to call her by her first name was one way that helped create balance. In the context of offering a directive, five of the participants talked about not being an expert or taking on an authoritative role as a very important way of creating balance as well as building a strong therapeutic relationship, an idea also noted in previously cited publications (Everall & Paulson, 2002; Hanna et al., 1999).

In addition, all participants discussed the value of tentatively providing ideas or options such that the young client can exercise their own choice, as opposed to giving advice or opinions. Mary and Marge both felt that in situations which require them to take the lead with their client, they might decide to do so "gently." Also, Rose, Mary and Liam talked about the value of considering the young client's perspective, even when they need to take a more directive stance.

Importantly, all participants clarified that it is crucial to consider their own objectives in choosing to be directive. Three participants cautioned counsellors to be aware of whether their objective was more personal or meant to satisfy their own needs, since this would not be helpful for clients. In fact, it was pointed out that this has the potential to cause other issues for the client. All participants stated that it is important to consider the benefit that choosing to be directive might hold for the young client. These ideas match Kahn's (1999) cautions of reflecting on the choice to be directive and ensuring it is aimed at benefiting the client. As a power-sharing strategy, it is valuable to check in with the client to clarify what is helpful for them (Kahn, 1999). This manner of working is indeed akin to that of collaboration in the therapy relationship. Attending to and ameliorating power imbalances works to create a safe therapeutic space in which directives may be taken up or not by the young person, thus also supporting client agency.

Collaboration and pacing in choosing to be directive

An approach in which the counsellor and client can collaborate on the goals and tasks of therapy (Bordin, 1979) can yield positive outcomes (Norcross, 2010). Several participants stated that it is helpful to consider the young person's perspectives in order to identify suitable goals and tasks of therapy. This kind of collaborative practice enables the counsellor to better support the young client and, in turn, enable the client to be more engaged, feel respected and understood, and possibly even be more committed to the therapeutic process. This came across even in participants' ideas of being directive with young clients. In particular, several participants discussed thoughts around pacing the counselling process and client readiness to receive a directive from the counsellor. Rose said that "it's more about impact…like, how will they take it and where they are at." She explained that ideally the young client is ready for a directive from the counsellor and may benefit from it.

Likewise, Eleanor appreciated Parsons' transtheoretical model (2009), an adaptation of the earlier work of Prochaska and DiClemente (1983), which encourages counsellors to identify the stage of change their client may be in and work from there to facilitate change. These stages include pre-contemplation, contemplation, determination, action, and maintenance. It seems palpable that a counsellor's facilitation of the client's process through these stages requires the use of directive skills.

Several participants discussed ideas around being flexible with young clients. These participants talked about needing to be attuned to the client's responses to a directive. Three participants mentioned that they might choose to rely on their intuition in certain situations. Jen talked about intuition as noticing their body language, the atmosphere in the counselling room, and even "listening to your own response to them" in order to gauge whether the client is still connected and engaged in the process. She found that listening to her intuition and accordingly adapting her response to the young person has been quite advantageous at times. This relates to the idea of pacing therapy to the client's needs.

Eleanor recalled attending a workshop led by Mick Cooper (2018) at the University of Auckland, where he emphasised "making sure that whatever you're choosing, you're choosing because that's what seems like it'll work best for the client." Likewise, it is crucial for counsellors to choose the use of directive skills based on the assessment that this is likely to work best for the client.

Further, literature suggests that utilising a collaborative process even in conducting risk assessments is beneficial since it enables the client to feel safe and engage in the risk assessment process (Agee, 2011). In a similar manner, Jen shared that she would "take the time and kind of talk about my worries and concerns and talk to them about my ethics…there's a little bit of warming up to" the point of actions that might be taken. She continued, "and then giving them a little bit of power within that" by collaboratively identifying who to call, details of what could be said, whether they want this person to come into school, and other such factors. Similar ideas were shared by Eleanor, Liam and Mary with regard to managing risk-related scenarios in a collaborative manner.

The researcher finds that this kind of a collaborative process enables both the counsellor and the client to gain a clearer picture of the situation and is particularly valuable even if a young person refuses intervention. Mary said that she "would be very interested in that and would want to understand where they were coming from." It is likely that such a conversation will require directive skills like actively focusing the conversation, questioning, and gentle challenging. Such an approach opens the conversation in a way that might provide the young person with the opportunity to see things from a different perspective or find a possible solution to a problem.

These ideas seem reminiscent of the ideas of working with the client's pace and readiness. It makes sense to consider the client's readiness to receive a directive from their counsellor.

Wise words for beginning counsellors

Mary and Rose acknowledged that beginning counsellors might experience some anxiety about doing a good job in this role, which also presents itself in their choice to use a more interventive client-centred style as opposed to a more non-directive client-centred style. As a beginning counsellor herself, Rose acknowledged, "we think that we have to solve their problems, and this person has to be right and we need to do this properly…and this creates tension…and maybe we can't be us in the relationship." Almost identically, Mary remembered that in her early days of counselling she would often wonder, "should I be doing this or should I be doing that?"

Both Rose and Mary empathised with this anxiety and reassure beginning counsellors that with experience it gets better. They both emphasised the value of being present for clients. Mary brought up a valuable idea of "going live," which she explained as "we can read books and books and books, but actually it's this one unique person with these unique circumstances and this unique personality. It's kind of like you just go live…" In a broader sense, Mary also talked about the counselling process as "we have that relationship and we have the knowledge base and we go live. And somehow it's this unique kind of dance with all of that." While this part of the discussion in both interviews was reconciled as being valuable for counselling practice in general, it was presented as advice for beginning counsellors to keep in mind as they develop their skills. This includes the development and use of directive skills in counselling.

In addition, it is also reassuring for counsellors to be able to rely on supervision for guidance on working with different client needs. In particular, Jen and Eleanor said that it was beneficial for them to discuss in supervision the need to be directive with certain clients.

Implications for practice

The participants provided some valuable guidelines for being directive with young clients. Of primary importance, counsellors would be wise to consider their objectives for offering a directive before doing so. Ethically, the aim of being directive is that it might benefit the client. The following are some factors to keep in mind when choosing to offer a directive to young clients:

- Work with the young person at their pace. Consider their readiness for receiving a directive and accordingly present it.
- Present directives in a tentative manner. It enables the client to feel that they have a choice in the matter, making the overall exercise likely more fruitful.
- Being honest and authentic with clients can be quite helpful. Particularly in situations where risk of harm may be present, making clear statements about your own concerns and intentions, and ensuring that you are keeping the young person informed about what is happening and why, can be quite helpful.
- It is essential to be clear about confidentiality and its limits as per the NZAC Code of Ethics (2016).
- Becoming aware of the power differential with the client and working towards creating a balance is vital, both for a good working relationship with the client and to offer a directive when required.
- Lastly, remember to be "present" with the young person and support them in their time of need.

Limitations and recommendations

The current research explored the experiences of a small group of high school counsellors, and as a small-scale study it does not draw broad conclusions about the use of directiveness in therapeutic relationships with young clients across Aotearoa New Zealand. The majority of the participants (five out of six) were female counsellors. Additionally, five out of six of the counsellors identified as Pākehā, and one as being of Indian ethnicity. In the bicultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand, it would have been valuable to this research if there were Māori and Pasifika counsellor voices as well.

The time limitations of a one-year Masters project may also have impacted on the overall scope of this research study. Most importantly, the busy schedule of the counsellors (which the researcher deeply appreciates and respects) and the relatively few high school counsellors available to participate in this research led to a decision to modify the inclusion criteria.

In further research, it would be fascinating to explore in more depth how counsellors empower their young clients while working in an ethical manner to keep them safe. In addition, it would be valuable to gain the young clients' perspectives on their experience of directiveness in the therapeutic relationship with their counsellors.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that there is a place for directiveness in a client-centred therapeutic relationship with young clients. As evident from this study, directiveness can be a response to the current or long-term needs of a young client. Being directive can usefully be employed when tailoring therapy to the needs of the client. In fact, tactfully used, it can scaffold conversations that are empowering for a young client. An important consideration is the young person's readiness to receive the directive and the counsellor's objective for offering one. This research shows that, sensitively used, directiveness offers high school counsellors the opportunity to support their clients in making progress, while tailoring their approach to the developmental level and personal circumstances of each young person.

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